

[Griffis on Egge, 'Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870-1920'](#)

Discussion published by Jessie Frazier on Friday, September 28, 2018

The following book review from H-Midwest may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

Author:

Sara Egge

Reviewer:

Chelsea Griffis

Sara Egge. *Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870-1920*. Iowa City: University Of Iowa Press, 2018. 242 pp. \$85.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-60938-557-6.

Reviewed by Chelsea Griffis (University of Toledo) **Published on** H-Midwest (September, 2018) **Commissioned by** Dustin McLochlin (Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library & Museums)

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In her book *Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870-1920*, historian Sara Egge makes a valuable contribution to the history of American women's suffrage. Her work spans the most active years of the ratification struggle in Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota. Egge argues that "understanding woman suffrage in the American Midwest begins at the intersection of citizenship, community, and civic activism" (p. 7). In essence, women's suffrage was successful in these three midwestern states because women reconceptualized why they deserved the right to vote. Turning away from Gilded Age ideas of municipal housekeeping, which necessitated women's political involvement in laws and issues concerning the home and family, Egge posits that midwestern women proved that they were active and vital citizens and, as citizens, deserved the right to vote. This was especially important after World War I began, as patriotism was displayed through active citizenship directed toward a successful end to the war. Since women proved their patriotism through rationing, joining the Red Cross, and selling Liberty Loans, they could make the claim that they deserved the vote as much as any patriotic American man. Their claim was strengthened by the surge of nativism during the war, as suffragists argued it made little sense to deny American women the vote while granting it to immigrant men who might still support their home country over the United States. Utilizing this patriotic and nativist wartime fervor, and relying on almost fifty years of grassroots organizing, midwestern women achieved the right to vote.

While Egge's final chapter is the most influential to her thesis, earlier chapters show that midwestern women would not have had the right to vote without the foundation of political activism constructed in earlier, unsuccessful campaigns. Midwestern women proved themselves vital members of their communities before the suffrage campaign even started, especially since the process of settlement necessitated every person's contributions. Egge is insistent that the historical context of local towns

mattered, and it is clear through her work that this was the case. By establishing women's clubs and aid societies, women proved that they were willing to contribute "as full members—as citizens—of their communities" (p. 49). Egge notes that "Yankee" women from the Northeast brought suffrage to the Midwest with them, and that originally suffrage was seen as an unwelcome political transplant. In all three states, suffrage efforts stalled, partially due to temperance politics. The more that women pressed to legalize alcohol, immigrants who utilized alcohol as part of their culture, particularly Germans, called for an end to the suffrage campaign. In moments such as this, it can be difficult to understand the significance of the midwestern context. Decades of scholarship have shown that temperance opponents also opposed women's right to vote. This is also the case with one of Egge's most compelling running threads, the importance of nativism in achieving women's suffrage. While it is clear that anti-German and anti-immigrant ideology propelled the success of women's suffrage in the Midwest, especially during World War I, it is not as clear how this nativism differed from that experienced across the country. In other words, it is difficult to understand what made the Midwest special, and therefore worthy of its own study. All the same, since there are so many studies of the suffrage movement in particular states and locales, it is about time that the Midwest got its due.

Egge's work is meticulously researched. The breadth of archival connections used is impressive, including local history archives from Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota, as well as personal archives of important suffrage figures such as Carrie Chapman Catt and Susan B. Anthony. It is clear that Egge has a strong grasp of suffrage historiography and has placed her work comfortably within. Each chapter includes narrative discussions, which are reminiscent of suffrage narratives found in textbooks and early monographs. To this end, this would be a useful book for an undergraduate classroom, especially to showcase the importance of regional study and a thorough use of archival collections. This will also be a useful book for anyone who is interested in the history of political activism. Egge's work is particularly strong in her discussion of the numerous failures in midwestern states until World War I. The confluence of various ideologies, including temperance and nativism, is especially prominent in her narrative and analysis.

Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest is an important contribution to the historiography of women's suffrage and of the Midwest. As Egge notes, context is important, and much of the scholarship on women's suffrage has focused on the coasts, both east and west. Situating the Midwest as her focus allows Egge to analyze at the local level, which, as she notes, has proven to be key in any successful political campaign. It is an important read for anyone interested in the history of American women.

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